FANTASTIC FOUR

How director Oley Sassone filmed it for less for Roger Corman's Concorde.

By Steve Biodrowski

How do you make a $40 million movie for $4 million? Obviously, you can't. However, you can take a script budgeted to be a multi-million-dollar spectacular and scale it down so that it can be shot on a shoestring. That's what happened when Bernd Eichinger's Neue Constantine Films joined forces with Roger Corman's Concorde-New Horizons Corporation to translate Marvel Comics' THE FANTASTIC FOUR to the big screen. Scheduled for release through Corman's company late this summer, the film was produced by Steve Rabiner, written by Craig J. Nevius and Kevin Rock (WARLOCK: THE ARMAGEDDON), and directed by Oley Sassone (BLOODFIST 3). The cast features Alex Hyde-White (INDIANA JONES AND THE LAST CRUSADE) as Dr. Reed Richards; Michael Bailey Smith (NIGHTMARE ON ELM STREET 5) as Ben Grimm; Jay Underwood (THE BOY WHO COULD FLY) as Johnny Storm; Rebecca Staab (MR. SATURDAY NIGHT) as Susan Storm and Joseph Culp as Dr. Doom.

Carl Ciarfalio as the Thing, makeup by Optic Nerve, Rebecca Staab as Susan Storm, Alex Hyde-White as Dr. Richards and Jay Underwood as Johnny Storm.

The one-time $40-million project is based on the popular Marvel Comics series, first published in 1961.

This is not the first time that Corman's name has been linked to a Marvel Comics character (at one time he was planning to direct SPIDERMAN, a property now assigned to Corman alumnus James Cameron), but FANTASTIC FOUR is not a project he developed himself. According to the genre veteran, "Bernd Eichenger, a prominent German producer, had bought the rights to it and had planned to do it on a $30 or $40-million dollar budget. He came to me in September and said he hadn't been able to put together all of his financing and his rights would run out if he didn't start shooting by December 31st. He asked, 'What could we do at your studio to make this picture?' So we put it together. We cut the budget from forty-million to four-million, and we started shooting on December 28th."

Slashing the budget by ninety percent was "a matter of simply using our money most efficiently, knowing that we would get good actors but not stars and that we would pinpoint those special effects we wanted in the film," said Corman. "We eased back on the number of special effects. We analyzed the script and said, 'We know we can't do all of these effects and, rather than try to do a cheap version of a lot of effects, let's figure out which are the most important and spend our money—more than we normally spend, though still not as much as JURASSIC PARK—on the effects that we consider to be significant.' Then we decided that FANTASTIC FOUR was its own star, so we could go for unknowns; we didn't [need to] spend money on cast. That's our theory, anyway. If I had the budget of BATMAN, I might have a different theory!"

Of course, Corman can af-

The Thing, makeup designed by John Vulich and Everett Burrell of Optic Nerve.

ford to joke, since he wasn't the director on the set trying to make a film about a human torch, an invisible girl, a stretching man, and a rock-like thing on such a paltry budget. Oley Sassone, the man calling the shots, also makes a stab at humor when asked how he directed a $40-million film for only $4 million.

"By the seat of your pants!" he laughed, but noted more seriously, "A lot of preparation. I did my homework with the people working on it. I shot-listed everything; I boarded all the effects shots. Even though pre-production time was about a month, I tried to prep everything as much as I could."

Sassone was well aware of the need for preparation, having helmed previous low-budget efforts for Corman. "I had done a couple of movies at Concorde and swore I would never go back," said Sassone. "But this was FANTASTIC FOUR, and Constantin films was involved. That really excited me, and the fact that they were going to be spending a little bit more money than the usual Concorde budget. I said I'd give it a shot, especially when I found out that Dr. Doom was the nemesis in this—he was one of my favorite characters as a kid. Spiderman was my favorite superhero, but the Fantastic Four and Dr. Doom were right up there. It was great to be involved with a project that I grew up with."

Though the script had been written prior to his involvement, Sassone provided input on a subsequent draft, tightening the focus of the story. "We made it more of the story between Reed and Dr. Doom," said Sassone. "They did a good job of bringing that to the surface."

The budget limited Sassone to a tight 21-day schedule, with a few extra days in post-production to film such pick-up shots as Dr. Doom's climactic fall from the ramparts of his castle. "It was really hell, but you get some weird adrenaline that keeps you going. The week after we finished shooting, I felt like I had jet lag, like I'd been stepped on by Godzilla. But when working, I was ready to jump in every day and fight—and it was a fight. If they were smart, they would have given us a little bit more time and money. We've got good performances. I've worked in theatre, and I always quote John Huston, who said he did a lot of his directing in casting. There's a lot of truth to that: start with a good script, get a good cast, and you're halfway there."

Sassone's decision to take on the daunting assignment was influenced by finding an optical effects supervisor, Scott Phillips, who showed how they could deliver the goods for less money. "I knew that if we couldn't get the special effects to look legitimate, then this would be a bust," said Sassone. "I would probably have bailed out of the project. Thank God in the pre-production stage I found Phillips, who showed me that this could look professional and up-to-par. It's putting him to the test, too."

Joseph Culp as nemesis Dr. Doom, designed by Optic Nerve, based on the comic book art of John Burns.

Phillips' specialty is the burgeoning field of computer graphics, the kind seen in TERMINATOR-2 and JURASSIC PARK. The innovative aspect of his work in FANTASTIC FOUR is that Phillips managed to composite elements into finished opticals by using his home equipment, not the vast resources of an organization like ILM. The previous drawback to this approach was not so much compositing the elements in the computer as getting a final image with resolution good enough to stand up on a big screen.

"They originally came to me saying they wanted to do the [effects] on video," said Phillips. "I was a Marvel Comics aficionado when I was a kid, so I just couldn't see it go down like that. I told them that for a very similar budget, just a little bit more, I could come up with a system that would allow them to use film res rather than video. Video res is okay for some stuff, music videos and things like that, but not for a motion-picture, not yet.

"Basically we're taking one frame of 35mm and

Doom and his henchmen, filmed on a shoestring at Corman's studio in Venice, a co-production with Germany's Neue Constantin Films, making use of an expiring option.

OPTIC NERVE MAKEUPS

Interfacing prosthetics with digital effects.

By Steve Biodrowski

Optic Nerve took on the makeup work on FANTASTIC FOUR for less than it was worth out of affection for the material. "They wanted the most for their money, and we jumped at the chance," said Everett Burrell. "I was a real big fan of the comics as a kid, and I knew that if someone did it who wasn't a fan, it would look like shit, because the money really wasn't there for the big companies to do it. This was a great source of entertainment for me, and I want someone else to enjoy it. The Thing and Dr. Doom are such good characters that they had to look halfway decent. They knew they were going to get a good job for a decent price." Burrell and partner John Vulich had done the makeup for producer Steve Rabiner on Corman's DRACULA RISING.

Optic Nerve's makeup for the Jeweler, their own Marvel design for a character scripted as Mole Man.

Besides Dr. Doom's armor, Optic Nerve's biggest job was creating a full-body suit for The Thing. "The Thing was a challenge because we only had four weeks to make it," said Burrell. "The suit had separate pieces for the hands and the feet. We had different heads: a mechanical head and a stunt head. He wore the mechanical head most of the time, the stunt head just when he was going through walls. We got him in and out of the suit pretty fast—about fifteen minutes in, ten minutes out. We made two suits, including a back-up one we never used. The face was all radio-controlled, so we didn't have to worry about hiding cables.

"Carl Ciarfalio, the stuntman inside the suit, worked out nice," Burrell continued. "[Michael Bailey Smith] wanted to be in the suit and act, but so much of the acting comes from us moving the servos in the mouth, especially the lip-syncing. I told the guy, 'Believe me, you don't want to be in this suit.' Carl has been in the business long enough to know what it's like. He had the training and the mentality, but I don't think the other guy has been around long enough in this movie environment to understand. Plus, Carl's a stunt guy; his body movements are great."

Controlling the lip-sync dialogue required three radio-control operators. "We had a guy on the upper mouth, a guy on the lower mouth, and a guy on the eyebrows; then Carl actually opened and closed the mouth with is jaw," said Burrell. "We practiced a few days before we reached the set, trying to sync up to the dialogue. Sometimes it works pretty good; sometimes it doesn't. Ultimately, when it's dubbed, you won't be able to tell. Look at the TEENAGE MUTANT NINJA TURTLES!"

Director Oley Sassone (l) and computer-effects man Scott Phillips (r) line up Carl Ciarfalio in Optic Nerve's Thing makeup for digital effects. Observing is Michael Bailey Smith, who plays Ben Grimm prior to his Thing metamorphosis.

Part of the fun of the project was the opportunity to design the look of the comic book characters so that they would work on-screen. For instance, the Thing looks like a rock, yet he has to appear alive and flexible to audiences. "That's one misconception: he's not made of rock," said Burrell. "He has a rock-like hide. The Thing looks different throughout the issues, so I stuck to the John Burns' issues. The Thing is kind of our own creation—we get a lot more character in the face—but it's still based on the early '70s Thing. And Dr. Doom is based on John Burns' Dr. Doom. The Jeweler was our own design altogether—he was the Mole Man originally, but we went our own way with that. No one ever said anything to us, and Marvel never had to approve anything."

Although pleased with Optic Nerve's contributions to the film, Burrell had misgivings about working on a $4 million film that was originally scripted to be in the $40 million range. "In the comic, when the Fantastic Four go through the radiation beams, it brings out their personalities: Johnny was always a hothead; Susan's kind of an introvert, so she turns invisible. But the film never really gets into that," noted Burrell. "They don't try to bring any seriousness to it or update it. But the film turned out better than anybody expected." □

Lining up a shot of Alex Hyde-White as Dr. Richards with Optic Nerve's arm prop. The stretching arm effect is added digitally during post-production.

transferring it to two reaspected Abacus frames," continued Phillips. "Abacus is a high-end graphics machine found in all high-end post houses, for image manipulation; it's a standard format in the graphics world. Using two frames to get the resolution of one frame of film means we have to touch-up forty-eight frames per second of film, but it's ten times faster than if you were running a single motion-picture frame at high-res. It brings it down to the desktop level, instead of the million dollar work stations. It's a new technology; it's never been done like this before. The real cost of this is getting the image in and out of the digital environment."

Phillips also figured out a way to digitally manipulate only those frames with an effect, not the entire live action shot. "What this system allows us to do is go in and—instead of having to open every frame all I need to touch is, say, 30 frames," said Phillips. "The big shift is not so much the technology—this is the same software we used on TERMINATOR 2—it's the ability to open up those 30 frames in your house."

Phillips' responsibility consists mostly of compositing elements filmed on the set (e.g., attaching a flaming stunt man's hand to Jay Underwood or one of makeup supplier Optic Nerve's extended limbs onto Alex Hyde-White). "This was supposed to be a fun campy little piece of eye candy, whipped out real quick," said Phillips. "But now I think it's got a big look to it, a lot bigger than our budget. The thing that's disturbing is they used to say, 'Fix it in post'; now it's 'Make it in post.'"

Phillips' task was easier thanks to Sassone's willingness to allow him on-set to supervise effects scenes. For instance, Dr. Doom's fall was filmed at Corman's small studio in Venice, California, with a simple flat standing in for a side of a castle and a large blue pad covered in blue for the stuntman to do the fall. Proper camera placement and staging insured that Phillips was able not only to add a gaping chasm below the character but also to extend his fall from a mere ten feet to an apparently endless drop. "The cool thing was being able to go in there during production and get the elements right," said Phillips. "That's rare; usually, there are too many egos involved. Oley was totally cool about it, so I have no excuses if it doesn't work!"

"My hope," said director Oley Sassone, "is that somebody out there who's able to pull me up to the next level will see it and say, 'Look at what those guys did!'"

Dr. Reed Richards (Alex Hyde-White) gets married, surrounded by Underwood and Ciarfalio, Corman's comic book adaptation, set to open this summer.

Explained Sassone of his cooperative approach, "I take my cue on the special effects from the guys that do special effects—that's the best way to learn. My attitude is, 'Whatever works for the movie, not necessarily for me or my ego.' When the movie's done, then my ego will get charged!"

Phillips also received some help on one of his flashier effects from Optic Nerve, although this case was more of a happy accident. When Ben Grimm metamorphoses into The Thing, Phillips wanted to avoid a straight morph of the character expanding to new proportions; instead, he wanted the rocky scales simply to spread over the character's skin. "Optic Nerve had never seen this guy that plays Ben Grimm, yet they made it pretty easy for me—the dimensions match up really well," said Phillips.

"That's great, but it's completely accidental," admitted Optic Nerve's Everett Burrell. "We cast Carl [Ciarfalio, who wears the suit] long before, because we couldn't wait. The guy who played Ben Grimm wouldn't have worked in the suit: he's too big, so we'd have nowhere to go—if you make The Thing too big, it looks weird."

The Thing was not the only character on which Optic Nerve and Scott Phillips' responsibilities overlapped—the filmmakers were originally hoping to accomplish more of their effects on set. "They wanted to know how much we could do with Dr. Richards, how much we could get him to stretch," said Burrell. "We did some pneumatic stretching arm stuff, but we could only take it so far. If we had more money, we could have done more, but ultimately it's easier and it's going to look better to do it on the computer."

Burrell may have been happy to leave the more extensive stretching effects to another department, but another area of overlap turned out to be less pleasing: Dr. Doom. "We did the armor; we didn't do the wardrobe," explained Burrell. "The one element I feel is really lacking in the film is the wardrobe. Not to blame the wardrobe guy, but I tried to stress to the producers very early on, 'The costumes are an effect almost as much as our stuff is; you should hire somebody who does this type of thing.' They didn't want to listen, and it hurts the film—I think the costumes are the worst thing in it. With a little more money and a little extra time, they could have looked so much better. Our stuff was good, but the problem with Dr. Doom is that he had to wear a costume that the other guy made, and I didn't like it. We should have said, 'We want to do all the costumes,' but again there were the time constraints. If we had more time, I would have hired somebody to do the Fantastic Four outfits and the Dr. Doom costumes. But it was a low-budget film, and not all things were done the way they should be. My biggest gripe is the Dr. Doom outfit: I don't like the tunic; I don't like the cape."

Sassone acknowledged the budgetary constraints but hoped the film would transcend them. "In other productions, even if it's Paramount or Warner Brothers, there's always that problem: there's never enough time, never enough money—you always hear that, even if you've got $50 million," he said philosophically. "For anybody who reads this article, especially producers in 'the loop,' as it's called—the big mainstream boys—the hardest thing for me is to break out of what's still considered low-budget filmmaking. But the people out there making decisions keep handing over ten and twenty million dollar jobs to guys who are not necessarily doing good work. My hope for this project is that somebody out there who's able to pull me up to the next level will say, 'Look what these guys did.'" □